

Words and Deeds: Facing Down Falsehood

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Psalm 52; John 7:15-18; Acts 24

Our final Scripture reading is Acts 24. May God add His richest blessings to the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. "Five days later the high priest Ananias went down to Caesarea with some of the elders and a lawyer named Tertullus, and they brought their charges against Paul before the governor. When Paul was called in, Tertullus presented his case before Felix: "We have enjoyed a long period of peace under you, and your foresight has brought about reforms in this nation. Everywhere and in every way, most excellent Felix, we acknowledge this with profound gratitude. But in order not to weary you further, I would request that you be kind enough to hear us briefly. We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect and even tried to desecrate the temple; so we seized him. By examining him yourself you will be able to learn the truth about all these charges we are bringing against him." The Jews joined in the accusation, asserting that these things were true.

When the governor motioned for him to speak, Paul replied: "I know that for a number of years you have been a judge over this nation; so I gladly make my defense. You can easily verify that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship. My accusers did not find me arguing with anyone at the temple, or stirring up a crowd in the synagogues or anywhere else in the city. They cannot prove to you the charges they are now making against me. However, I admit that I worship the God of our fathers as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that agrees with the Law and that is written in the Prophets, and I have the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man. After an absence of several years, I came to Jerusalem to bring my people gifts for the poor and to present offerings. I was ceremonially clean when they found me in the temple courts doing this. There was no crowd with me, nor was I involved in any disturbance. But there are some Jews from the province of Asia, who ought to be here before you and bring charges if they have anything against me. Or these who are here should state what crime they found in me when I stood before the Sanhedrin – unless it was this one thing I shouted as I stood in their presence: 'It is concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today.'"

Then Felix, who was well acquainted with the Way, adjourned the proceedings. "When Lysias the commander comes," he said, "I will decide your case." He ordered the centurion to keep Paul under guard but to give him some freedom and permit his friends to take care of his needs. Several days later Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was a Jewess. He sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus. As Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, "That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you." At the same time he was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him. When two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, but because Felix wanted to grant a favor to the Jews, he left Paul in prison."

In 2004, a documentary shook the biggest fast-food company in the world and almost instantly became regular viewing for health and biology classes around the country. That film was called *Super Size Me*. Morgan Spurlock, the documentary filmmaker, did an experiment – he ate exclusively at McDonalds for 30 days, consuming 5,000 calories a day. At the time, McDonalds had what was known as super-size meals. The rule was, any time Spurlock was offered one at the counter, he couldn't refused. In a month's time, his doctors were shocked – he'd gained 25 pounds, he was depressed with multiple physical and mental ailments, his cholesterol was up, and his liver showed significant damage. The film also showed how McDonalds tries to influence children into loving their brand.

The film was made for \$65,000 and made over \$22 million at the box office, not counting later video sales and rentals. It got great reviews. Within a few months of its release, McDonalds stopped offering super sizes, though they claimed it had nothing to do with the film. Educators started showing the film because it was intentionally funny and over-the-top, catching students' attention while teaching about the dangers of fast food. The film makes you worried that if you eat too much fast food, it will kill you.

The problem is, the core of the story just wasn't true. Nearly 15 years after the film's release, Spurlock admitted that he is a recovering alcoholic, that he hasn't spent a full week sober since he was 13 years old. That means – as you might have guessed – that Spurlock was drinking throughout the making of *Super Size Me*. The worst of his ailments, like his liver problems, were caused not by McDonalds but Jack Daniels. Another educator, trying to show the fallacies of the film, ate exclusively at McDonalds for half a year – 180 days – but he tracked what he ate carefully, and he lost 60 pounds!

Now this isn't to make you run out and get a Big Mac, but it illustrates a very real point – people lie all the time to get what they want, to “prove” what they want to be true. Today's passage illustrates the problems of falsehood, and how a lifestyle of falsehood and dishonesty hurts us and others. It also shows us how to defend the truth and stand for what is right.

As we might remember, in our last several passages Paul has been under arrest, trying to share the truth of the gospel with the Jewish people while Roman soldiers protected him from being lynched by a mob or assassinated by a group of dagger men. Last we saw him, an armed contingent took Paul by night to Caesarea to Governor Felix in order to hear his case. Finally, his accusers have shown up to make their claims against him, led by a lawyer named Tertullus.

What is really striking about Tertullus is just how slick he is. He is skilled in Greek rhetoric, which taught speakers to flatter their audiences in order to get their attention. But Tertullus goes beyond flattery into plain out-and-out lying. Despite what Tertullus says, there was less peace during Felix's administration than any other. Tertullus talks about reforms, but the truth was that all sorts of anti-Roman factions sprang up during Felix's time in office because, as one commentator put it, he “made life miserable for the Jews.” Virtually nothing Tertullus said was true, but all of it was designed to appeal to how a Roman governor thought of himself – a bringer of peace, prosperity, and order.

Tertullus' lies extend to the case of Paul. He calls Paul a “troublemaker,” literally a “petulance” or “plague” in the Greek. He's essentially name-calling, and his accusations that Paul is stirring up trouble around the world is meant to get Felix past the truth that this is an exclusively Jewish issue; if Tertullus can convince Felix that Paul is a problem for Rome, then there's a better reason for Felix to rule against him. He does include a bit of truth – Paul is among the very top of the leadership of the Christian movement. But then he repeats the lie that started the whole mess – that Paul desecrated the Jewish temple.

Here's the main idea we can see from this part of the passage: *We cannot determine truth or falsehood by the skills of the speaker.* Tertullus is a much better public speaker than Paul as far as the art of rhetoric is concerned. He ingratiates himself to the governor; he uses smooth words and persuading talk; if you didn't know the history of what had really happened, he could be very convincing. He is scholarly, erudite, believable. His case sounds solid. It just isn't true.

How many people can we think of who have duped us? By the amount of telemarketing calls I get, I'd say that there's money to be made in saying things in such a way that we believe that they are true. Every restaurant has up signs where someone somewhere has said that they make the best burger or pizza or liverwurst sandwich. We're impressed by names like The New York Times and the Washington Post that supposedly symbolize quality. But good writing, clever speaking, excellent photographs, exciting stories....they don't make anything true.

This has played a big part in recent politics. President Obama gave regal speeches with confidence and poise, and he was said to never travel anywhere without his teleprompter so he could always give a speech that looked and sounded good. President Trump says whatever is on his mind whenever it's on his mind, mostly on Twitter, occasionally in speeches that we know have been prepared but where he often goes off script and says what he thinks. Depending on who you are, one form may appeal to you more than another. But neither one's form says anything about whether or not what they say is actually true.

There are plenty of churches out there with plenty of pastors, and I'd say a fair number of them are better public speakers than me. I'm thankful for those speakers who really caught my attention and taught me the truth, folks like my home church pastors Henry Date and Jim Capps and Kevin Bausman, Christian mentors reaching hundreds of thousands like R.C. Sproul and Albert Mohler and Alister Begg. But what made them worthwhile preachers was not that they were eloquent (though they often were), or intelligent (though all of them were), but that they spoke truth and made it accessible in a way I could understand.

But the church world is full of false teachers, too, teachers with huge churches and television ministries and jet planes. They sound so good! They look so good! I couldn't smile like Joel Osteen on the cover of his books if they took a thousand pictures. I don't have the charisma of a Benny Hinn or a Robert Schuller. But as good as they look and their messages sound, they are dead wrong, dangerously wrong, perhaps even deadly to the soul wrong. We must look beyond the format of the message, the speaker giving the message, the way the message is conveyed, and ask, “Is it true?”

As we tell others about Jesus, the question we have to ask ourselves is, “Is what I'm saying true?” Jesus loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life? Only half-true. The gospel is also, we have through our sinful actions incurred the rightful and just wrath of God, and we need to repent of our sins and trust in Jesus alone for salvation. We can proclaim a story where God loves everyone the exact same in every way and never judges any wrongdoing and just wants us to be happy. Sometimes, that story has been told because we're afraid people won't accept the gospel as presented to us in Scripture. It's a nice story. It's just not true.

We as Christians are the people of truth. I preach every week because I believe the Bible is completely true. It tells me to seek truth, to proclaim truth, to love truth. The more you study the story of Jesus, the more convincing it becomes. We don't believe it because of the people telling us the story; we believe it because it is truth.

Now, Paul illustrates this as he gives his defense. While he treats Felix with honor, he doesn't make a play for his affections or an appeal to his ego. He dives in and refutes Tertullus' charges – he speaks truthfully, he admits when the story is correct about his leadership of the Way, he goes step by step through what happened in Jerusalem and how no one can prove what they claim because it simply didn't happen – Paul did nothing to instigate a riot.

He shows us how Christians are to act. *Christians speak with grace, love, and truth, no matter the audience or the consequences.* Paul could have tried lying. He could have tried flattery. And later, we'll learn, he could have tried bribery. But Paul didn't stoop to any of those things. He made his case simply, honorably, and carefully.

How I wish Christians today would do the same! We have a terrible habit of arguing like the world argues. I see Christians online being argumentative, making straw man arguments, name calling, fundamentally missing the point of acting like Christ in all situations. Do we get angry when we are wronged? Sure. But in Ephesians 4:26, quoting Psalm 4, Paul writes, “In your anger, do not sin.”

The early church consistently shared and defended the faith in such a way that unbelievers believed the gospel. It was shared with truth; it was shared with a genuine love and an interest in the salvation of others; it was shared as Christians risked their lives for those who had once been enemies. The church stood against the Caesars when they demanded to be worshipped, even though it meant being thrown to the lions. The church rescued children their Roman neighbors left out on the stoop to die. In everything, the early believers tried to model Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit.

How committed are we to being both truthful and loving, neither pulling punches when the truth is hard nor abandoning grace when others are cruel to us? This is a growth curve for me, and I imagine it is for everyone here. Telling the truth is hard, especially when we don't see an immediate benefit. Being graceful is tough when others are playing dirty. But I want us to contemplate these traits, traits that Paul showed in his defense, traits that Jesus showed in full measure in His earthly life. May we commit to being truthful and gracious both, showing both in our daily lives as the Spirit leads us.

So finally we come to the story of Governor Felix. He adjourns the proceedings; the case cannot proceed any further. He tells everyone, "I'll make my decision once I hear from Lysius, the commander in Jerusalem." The thing is, Lysius had already sent word with his officers that he thought Paul had committed no crime against Roman law. Lysius' letter was kind of self-serving, but he was clearly convinced of Paul's innocence. Felix was just looking for an excuse to postpone things.

And postpone he does, for nearly two years. Paul has some freedoms; he can see friends; yet he's constantly under guard. Felix hopes, at least for a time, that this might be an opportunity to get rich. It was against the law for civil authorities to take bribes, and they could lose their positions for it, but in practice it was very common. He's not worried about what's true or false; he's more interested in how he can benefit.

But there's more to Felix's story. His wife Drusilla had been married before at a very young age, and Felix persuaded her to leave her unhappy marriage to be with him. But this violated Jewish law, and when Paul talked about Christianity and about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, it was not about a vague theological argument to Felix. This was his life. He doesn't scoff at the gospel; it speaks to his situation.

But rather than come to terms with his sin and accept the truth, rather than accept the gift of salvation in Christ, he cuts off Paul out of fear. And while he talks with Paul often, when he's eventually kicked out of office for mishandling local Jewish affairs, he needs to smooth things over with them, so he keeps Paul in prison. He can't deal with the truth, and his story becomes a tragedy.

And that leads me to our final short thought: *refusing to face sin and falsehood has grave consequences*. Not only does Paul sit around for two years with no real proof against him, Felix misses the opportunity to become a believer, to be forgiven, and to know the joy Paul preaches. Felix's cowardice hurts himself and others. We need to see sin and falsehood for what they are. If they are in our lives, we need to repent of them. And if we have the opportunity to expose them in our communities or our friendships, we as the people of the truth need to do so.

This week, Cameron and I had a bear of a time trying to power wash the bricks on the front of Katie's house in Kokomo. Katie's home is surrounded by ivy, and a lot of it had crawled its way up the side of the house. We think she liked the look of it like some medieval English garden, and she didn't want to deal with it. But I'll tell you what – it is a nightmare trying to get ivy out of textured brick. It grows in the cracks and crevices, and even though you can get it off the house, it leaves bits and pieces and leftovers that are almost impossible to get out. We actually broke a piece of the power washer before we could even get a significant portion done! We'll have to do more next week.

Sin and lies are a lot like that ivy. They slowly crawl their way into our lives. They even look sort of pretty for a while. But then they burrow so deep that they do real and permanent damage, and getting them out of our lives can be next to impossible. God can get those deep roots out and make us clean again, but even then, it usually takes time and a lot of work and a lot of truth-telling and a lot of heartache. God wants to spare us that.

Friends, if we get anything out of today's passage, it's that we as God's sons and daughters need to pursue the truth faithfully. Not the world's truth, not whatever's popular, not whoever sounds best or has the most persuasive words, but God's truth. Paul's truthful testimony may not have gotten him out of prison, but it demonstrates the righteousness God had built in him in contrast to those around him willing to lie for their own ends. May we be people of truth, standing for the truth of the gospel – the one truth that matters in every generation.